

Analyzing and Evaluating U.S. Records

When you find records about your ancestors, do you spend time reading through and analyzing those documents? The fourth step of the research process is to evaluate new information. In this class, we will discuss the importance of not just gathering records, but evaluating them. Come learn how to squeeze the records until they talk

Evaluate the Record

Start by evaluating the record itself. Who created the record? Why was it created? How was it created? Who maintains the original records? How are those records organized? Is part of the record missing or inaccessible?

Consider whether the record is an original or a derivative. An original record is still in its first recorded form. A derivative is anything created by copying or manipulating the content from original records. Derivatives include abstracts, authored works, compilations, databases, extracts, indexes, transcriptions, and translations.

If the record is an original, consider whether it is the original record or a copy of the original. Original records were often copied by county and town clerks into court books. Some records, such as censuses and vitals, may be copied and the copies sent to another government agency (such as a state or federal government). Researchers also make photocopies. And many records have been microfilmed, digitized, or both. Every time an original is copied, the possibility for errors is introduced.

Also consider whether there are any issues with the record. Is there evidence of missing information? Is some of the information unreadable? Has the record been damaged? Has it been torn or is there evidence of mold? Is there evidence of different types of handwriting? Is the document handwritten or typewritten? If it's typed, was it created in an era after the typewriter was invented?

Read the Record

Read through each record carefully and extract information. Write down names, dates, and places. Identify other key pieces of information such as property ownership, land descriptions, occupations, clues to socioeconomic status or religious affiliation, and so forth. If the document includes words that are hard to decipher, ask for help. Use historical or genealogical dictionaries to look up unfamiliar terms. Transcribe and/or abstract documents with large blocks of text, such as land records, wills, court petitions, or personal letters. When working with large data sets, such as land indexes or multi-document records, extract data into tables. Also use tables to track a family or individual through the same record group, such as census, tax, or city directories, across multiple years.

Evaluate Information

Once you have extracted data from the records, evaluate the information. Does the record belong to the family for whom you are searching? Identify who provided the information for the record (known as the informant)? How does the informant know that information? Does the informant have first-hand knowledge or access to resources (such as family bibles) with first-hand knowledge? Does the informant have any reason to lie?

The information found on records can be either primary or secondary. Primary information is recorded at or near the time of the event. Secondary information is recorded after the event has passed.

A single record may contain both primary and secondary information. For example, on a death

certificate, the death date and place, burial date and place, and cause of death are considered to be primary pieces of information. However, a birthdate and place, and the names of the descendant's parents (unless the decedent is an infant) is considered secondary information.

Identify Evidence

As you evaluate the information from a record, identify evidence. Evidence is any information which directly or indirectly answers your research goal.

Direct evidence directly answers your research goal. For example, when researching an ancestor's parents, the names listed on the death certificate is direct evidence.

Indirect evidence answers your research goal when combined with evidence from other records. Let's say you are researching your ancestor's parents. A census record lists a younger brother in the household of your ancestor. The brother's death certificate names his parents. Concluding that the parents named on the death certificate of your ancestor's brother is considered indirect evidence.

Correlate Evidence

Compare and correlate information and evidence from multiple documents. Identify conflicting information. Evaluating the record groups and the records themselves can help you determine which record is more reliable. Once you have compiled your evidence, identify an answer to your research goal. Then, write out your conclusion.

Identify Next Steps

Once you have analyzed and evaluated a record, consider what records you should search next based on the information found in the record. Add those records to your research plan. Also review your research plan and remove records you no longer need to search.

Also consider whether the record has raised any new questions you need to answer, whether there is conflicting information you need to resolve, or whether you have identified questions for future research projects.

Organize Research

As you research, make sure to stay organized. Keep track of the sources you search, regardless of whether or not you locate your ancestor in those records. When you find a record, keep track of where and how you found the record. Can you (or someone else) find that record again if you need to? One of the best tools for organizing your research is a research log or research journal. A research log lets you track the sources you search, identify results, record unique spellings (that make records hard to find), plan what to search next, and create an index to your filing system.

Every time you find a record, preserve a copy of that record, either in paper format, in digital format, or by attaching it to an online family tree. Remember that you may not easily find that record again. An odd spelling may make it difficult to find. The record may no longer be available in six months or a year. Or the website hosting that record may go offline. Also make sure to label your documents. If you print a record, write information on how you found the record on the front of the document. If you choose to save digital files, use full, descriptive names and link your research log to your digital files. Make sure to include enough information on the document or in the file name that you can find the record again.